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SUBJECT: PROMOTING GRASS ROOTS EFFORTS TO STOP THE VIOLENCE

REF: (A) BASRAH 88 (B) BASRAH 41 (C) BASRAH 16

¶1. (SBU) Over the past two months, militia attacks against Coalition personnel in Basrah have significantly subsided, but the absence of anti-Coalition violence has not resulted in tranquility for the citizens of Basrah. Shi'a militias and criminal gangs continue to terrorize Basrawis through a campaign of murder, intimidation, kidnappings, rape, and torture, in a struggle for power in Iraq's most prosperous province. Various accounts indicate the weekly murder rate could be as high as 40 to 50. Assassinations of or attacks against public officials, prominent clerics, and women, who choose not to espouse strict Muslim traditions, are commonplace. (See Ref. A.) In what was once considered Iraq's open city, people are now afraid to venture out at night.

¶2. (SBU) British soldiers no longer patrol the streets of Basrah, and the impending drawdown of UK forces tempers expectations for future counter-militia operations. Iraqi Security Forces, under new and capable leadership, have made some strides but reforming a police force that is rampant with militia members is an arduous task, further compounded by Iranian intervention. Within the last month, there have been five attempts on the life of the police chief; several of his senior officers have not fared so well.

¶3. (SBU) Militias and political parties are now referred to as one and the same, a reflection of the transformation of political interaction. In the scramble for power, increasing the ranks is imperative, and nothing offers more promise to disenfranchised young males than the opportunity to earn money and wield power. Even for the educated, there are few opportunities outside of the party/militia system, and those who choose to remain independent are left vulnerable.

¶4. (SBU) As we contemplate the way forward, we must not resign ourselves to a Basrah driven by force, fear, cronyism, and foreign subversion. This is antithetical to our vision for Iraq, and abandons in vain those who have relied on our promise for a better future. How to address this problem remains our major challenge. A direct confrontation with the militias is now a task for the ISF, and one which they are not yet fully prepared to undertake. Job-creation is also an important component to the solution, and we should continue to encourage the utilization of Iraqi revenues and the attraction of foreign direct investment. We also must be careful to prevent any new investments from being co-opted by the militias.

¶5. (SBU) Perhaps, the simplest solution lies with the people of Basrah themselves. By most accounts, the vast majority of

Basrawis oppose the militias and detest Iranian meddling but fear for their lives. There are however indications that people are willing to take a stand against violence. In May, thousands took to the streets in Basrah to protest against the militias. (Ref. B) During a February conference, women leaders discussed their counter-violence efforts (ref. C), and tribal leaders are looking for ways to address the growing influence of militias. We should harness this enmity for the malign actors and the desire for a better Basrah by mobilizing the tribal and civic leaders to stop the violence and take back their communities.

6 (SBU) One tried and tested method for tackling community violence is CeaseFire. (www.ceasefirechicago.org) Created in Chicago by Gary Slutkin, M.D., the CeaseFire premise is that violence is an epidemic perpetrated by a small group of actors. It unites community leaders and mobilizes their forces in concert to stem the spread of the epidemic and force the bad elements from their communities. It has been successful in Chicago and is being implemented in several other U.S. cities. The Office of Policy and Planning (S/P) has been consulting with Dr. Slutkin on developing a CeaseFire program for Iraq.

17. (SBU) The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) may soon be awarding grants to organizations to promote democracy and good governance in Iraq. The American Islamic Congress, (AIC), which has an office in Basrah, intends to submit a project proposal for Basrah based on the Ceasefire model. REO Basrah would endorse such a proposal and could provide additional support. We could link community leaders to security officials who are committed to taking on the militias, and provide them with quick response funds (QRF) for community parks and centers. The people in Basrah have no wish to live in fear of the excessive violence that has overtaken their province. While they are best placed to reclaim their communities, we should assist them in doing so.

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